

Madame Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rob Tallon and I am the Executive Director of Reach, Inc. located in Bozeman. I have 32 years experience working in this field, 30 of which have been in Montana.

In preparing my thoughts last week I came across a copy of the testimony I gave before this committee on January 24<sup>th</sup> of 2001. Unfortunately things have not changed much over the last 6 years in regard to this issue. Wages are still below that of the fast food industry and turnover is more than triple the national average. (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Overall Voluntary Turnover rate of 23.4%).

Last year at Reach we had 78 positions turnover out of 100. I estimate this cost our agency over \$140,000 in lost training time and paid overtime. Vacancy rates average 15% across the state meaning that at Reach on an average day we have 15 vacant positions. This leaves our staff scrambling to cover for those vacancies. These problems challenge each and every one of the organizations like Reach in our state as well as the over 3,500 people with developmental disabilities we support. When we move into the new rate system, staff vacancies will affect our ability to bill for services further cutting our budgets.

The quality of human services depends on the quality of the direct service professionals that provide those supports. The problems in recruitment and retention result in an inadequate quality of service for the people that we support. With the clients that we serve going through 5-10 different staff members every year, there can be no consistency. This turnover adds to the amount of errors made in assisting with medications, and providing care and supervision. Obviously if positions are vacant there's no one to provide support to clients and we have to fill in with part-time and relief staff who are unfamiliar with them, or by paying over time rates of time and a half to our staff who do stay.

The budget from Governor Schweitzer acknowledges the crisis we face by proposing an \$18 million dollar increase to address provider rates. Unfortunately this does not go far enough since it will only result in providers being able to raise group home staff from \$8.56 per hour to \$9.60 per hour. In many cities in Montana that is not even on par with starting wages at McDonalds. Another portion of his budget allocates \$11.4 million to move people off the waiting list into services. If we can't recruit and retain staff there will be no waiting list reduction.

I am asking that you fund community services at the \$30 million biennium increase level requested by the Department so that we can adequately serve those currently in services.

This legislature must act on this crisis because our system will not last another two years if you don't.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.